

# Do You Provide Customer Disservice?

I'll bet you've called some corporation, been connected to the call centre, and been put on hold. After what seems like hours of waiting, you're told your call is very important. You're a very valuable customer. All this adulation is expressed by some automated voice. Great consolation! Not.

Once you are finally connected with a live person, you realize the operator has no authority. Next, you're transferred; put on hold, flattered again by that automated voice, connected, and transferred again. Finally, you hang up, no better off than you were an hour ago when the phone odyssey began.

Internet contact companies have probably not been more helpful. Maybe you've had an inquiry to make and invested a substantial amount of time in explaining your request, only to receive an auto response assuring you of your importance and of the imminent likelihood of someone getting back to you. A month later, you're still be waiting for that reply to your query.

We've all been there. These experiences are symptomatic of rampant customer-relations malaise. Customers recognize this as the customer disservice it is, reject the brand in disgust, and turn to other suppliers in

the hope of receiving a modicum of service.

Basic customer servicing is an important branding component. Mismanagement leads to customer frustration, causing customers to abandon a brand and discuss their dissatisfaction in the office, over coffee, and at dinner parties. The brand-damaging perceptions spread virally in ever-widening circles.

Ensure your brand's service doesn't degenerate into a transparent revenue-generator. Microsoft's pay-for-support program once offered helpful service via discrete channels: One was free, with general advice that often referred customers to self-help Web pages; the other level was a paid service in which technicians helped individual queries. The system worked, offering customers choices and options. In time, the service became a money-generating activity. It was outsourced to operators with limited knowledge. A stopwatch ticked up the dollars in the background. The result was even deeper user frustration.

What can you do to achieve brand-building rather than brand-damaging customer service? Don't fool yourself or your customers. Brand-builders control elements of these

systems. I'd be surprised if you didn't have a say in how a database was built, a newsletter was composed, call centre procedures were compiled, or customer services worked. Each element is part of branding's second face. Each provides an opportunity for intimate contact between the brand and the outside world.

Have you ever tried, anonymously, to be your own company's customer? If you haven't, I urge you to do so. Now. Be analytical when you do get hold of a correspondent. What language does your brand's representatives use? How helpful are they in directing a query to the proper department? Your customers don't understand in-house jargon, and they don't know whom they're meant to seek help from. They rely on your brand to act responsibly and deliver satisfaction.

Following an anonymous visit to your company's customer service site, compare the results of your inquiry with your brand's image and vision. What expectations have you established among



customers? Are they met? How does customer service reflect your brand's philosophy? Do you provide customers and your brand a disservice?

Plastering a toll-free number on your Web site is not enough. What's behind those digits is what counts. Go behind them incognito. Look at your brand from a customer's point of view. Pretend you're that customer, go online, and hope you don't have a long wait.

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